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U. S. Dept. of Agriculture

HOUSEHOLD CALENDAR

The 1935 Christmas Turkey

A radio interview between Miss Ruth Van Deman, Bureau of Home Economics, and Mr. Thomas W. Heitz, Bureau of Agricultural Economics, delivered in the Department of Agriculture period of the National Farm and Home Hour, broadcast by a network of 48 associate NBC stations, Wednesday, December 10, 1935.

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MR. SALISBURY: Two weeks from just about this hour, I suppose most of us will be sitting down to our Christmas dinners. So with that big culinary event "just around the corner," to use that good old phrase worn smooth by frequent repetition, this seems an ideal time to have a Household Calendar talk about the Christmas turkey. A Household Calendar talk means of course that you'll be hearing from your friend Ruth Van Deman, in a minute. And to give the latest market news on the turkey supply, she's brought along with her today Mr. Heitz of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics.

All right, Miss Van Deman, lead on with the turkeys. Bigger, browner, fatter, juicier, more tender turkeys. I'm all for 'em. And don't forget the stuffing -- savory and crumbly, and not too moist -- the kind of stuffing that has a perfect affinity for turkey gravy.

MISS VAN DEMAN: I'll do my best. But before we get into the roasting and stuffing, we want Mr. Heitz to give us a quick review of the turkey market. Mr. Heitz, your chief told me you know everything there is to know about turkeys.

MR. HEITZ: Oh, you mustn't take that remark too literally, Miss Van Deman. That was just his polite way of referring to my job of grading turkeys according to Government standards. He knows I've seen lots of turkeys this fall, out in the nine Western States where we were holding turkey grading schools.

MISS VAN DEMAN: Was Texas one of them? I understand that Texas grows more turkeys than any other State.

MR. HEITZ: That's right. Yes, I was in Texas. And in Arizona, California, Washington, Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, Utah, and North Dakota. About three-fourths of the annual turkey supply comes from those nine States. Farmers out there are banding together into cooperative associations to market their birds. And we're teaching them how to kill, and dress, and cool, and pack, and load their fine turkeys into cars, so they'll reach the market in the best possible condition. The Northwestern Turkey Growers Association alone is handling about six million pounds of turkeys for the holiday trade this year. Those are all Government graded birds.

MISS VAN DEMAN: And do those Government grades carry through to the consumer? For instance, if one of those turkeys got into the Washington market, would there be a tag on it to let me know how it rated according to your grading plan?

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MR. HEITZ: It might. That particular association is tagging some forty carloads of its dressed turkeys -- about seventy-two thousand birds with little round tags like this one, clipped into the wing.

MISS VAN DEMAN: Good. May I see that tag? Why, this really tells something I want to know. It says -- "Government Graded. U. S. Prime Turkey, young." I'm glad it specified young. That's one of the things a woman wants to know when she buys a turkey, whether it's young or old. Because that makes a difference in the way you cook it. An old turkey needs a cover on the roaster to hold the steam in and help soften those tough muscles in the legs and thighs. But a young turkey is at its best when it's roasted in an open pan, provided of course you keep the oven temperature moderate for most of the time.

But Mr. Heitz, what about the millions of other turkeys that aren't marked with a Government grade stamp, and don't have anything to indicate whether they are young or old, or prime, or what have you? Can't you give us a few pointers to help us in picking out a good bird when we have nothing but our own limited experience to guide us? What should we look for first?

MR. HEITZ: Well, to tell whether a turkey's young or old, feel the breastbone. If the breastbone is hard and rigid clear down to the tip when you press it, then the bird is over a year old. It isn't young. The cartilage has turned to hard bone. But in a young turkey the breastbone is still flexible when you press it at the tip.

MISS VAN DEMAN: I don't doubt that's a good test, Mr. Heitz, for somebody like you who's experienced in handling turkeys. But you know, most of us are intimately acquainted with only one or maybe two turkey breastbones a year. Can't you give us a surer test?

MR. HEITZ: Yes, look at the oil sac on top of the tail, and feel it. In a young turkey, the oil sac is soft, but in an old bird it's as hard as a marble. This is a practically infallible test of the age of a turkey.

MISS VAN DEMAN: How about weight?

MR. HEITZ: That's not so good an indication as it used to be. Turkey growers nowadays are learning how to put weight on their young birds. This fall I've seen young hen turkeys weighing as high as 16 pounds, and young toms 23 and 24 pounds. Those of course are rather exceptional. The general run of good quality young hens for the Christmas market will be around 10 to 12 pounds and the young toms 14 to 16. Personally, for my own family, I'd never buy a turkey under 12 pounds. I'd feel that I was getting too much bone in proportion to meat if I got a turkey under 12 or 14 pounds. This, of course, is the weight undrawn, with head and feet on. That's the way most turkeys are sold in the market.

MISS VAN DEMAN: What about the fat on a turkey? Do you think that a great deal of fat indicates quality?

MR. HEITZ: Not necessarily. Big lumps of fat all over the body of a turkey generally indicates that it's a mature bird. A well-fleshed young bird has a wide streak of fat down the back from neck to tail, and a streak down each side of the breast. Then there's a good-sized patch of fat over the hips, but the fat on a young turkey never looks greasy and oily.

I always notice also the color of the skin of a turkey. The younger birds are more likely to be light colored, like milk-fed poultry. As turkeys get older their skin becomes more of a yellowish brown.

And of course to save work with the tweezers in the kitchen, I always try to choose a bird with no pin feathers, or anyway as few as possible.

MISS VAN DEMAN: And, I hope, a bird with no tears or breaks in the skin. Of course you've heard that old tale about the bride who thought that basting the turkey meant sewing up the holes with her needle and thread.

MR. HEITZ: Yes, that's one of the hardy perennials. But there's no doubt about it, unbroken skin, and clear bright-looking skin are marks of quality in a turkey. Red dis-colored skin is a sign of improper cooling and maybe poor bleeding. And be sure there's no feed in the turkey's crop. A full crop creates gas that escapes into the meat and spoils the flavor.

MR. SALISBURY: Well, now as the representative of the man who pays the bill for the Christmas turkey, I'd like to hear about prices, Mr. Heitz. Are they going to be high, or low, or just moderate?

MR. HEITZ: Probably a few cents a pound higher than last year. At Thanksgiving, you remember, turkeys here in the East retailed at 35 to 37 cents. That was 5 or 6 cents above last year's price. So the Christmas market will undoubtedly reflect that same trend. But even so, I don't know any turkey growers who are getting rich off their profits. Raising turkeys is no easy business, and I think a man has a lot of nerve to go into it at all.

But, now, Miss Van Deman, what about that savory stuffing and perfect roasting, mentioned awhile back? Aren't you going to tell the world how to cook a turkey to perfection?

MISS VAN DEMAN: 'Fraid there isn't time today.

MR. SALISBURY: Well, I know you have a recipe for roasting a turkey and making the stuffing, because I've seen it around the Salisbury home kitchen. Isn't that available to anybody who writes to you?

MISS VAN DEMAN: Yes, it is. I'll mail it right out to any homemaker, or bride, or even an adventurous husband who wants help on cooking the Christmas turkey. And it carries with it my good wishes for a successful Christmas dinner.

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